DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 392 FL 022 150

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TITLE Demonstrating Miscommunication Problems Between American and Japanese Businessmen Through Video.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (12th, Ypsilanti, MI, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Problems; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; English; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Relationship; *Japanese; Language Attitudes; *Language Patterns; Languages for Special Purposes; Second Language Instruction; *Sex Bias; Sex Differences; Stereotypes; *Videotape Recordings; Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Japan; United States

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses common miscommunication problems that occur between Japanese and Americans, even when both are speaking Japanese, with a focus on high contextuality and women's position in business organizations. It also examines how these cultural differences can be addressed through the use of videotaped conversations. One of the preeminent features of the Japanese language is that items obvious to conversants are not stated. The subject and direct object of a sentence are often omitted, even in written communication, making it difficult for non-native speakers to comprehend the exact meaning. Context, expectations, and gestures also play important roles in conversation. Women in Japanese corporations are still largely relegated to secretarial and receptionist roles, even if they possess university degrees, despite the passage of equal employment legislation. Japanese businessmen tend to consider women fit only for subordinate positions, and attitudes toward sexual harassment and discrimination are fairly lax. Other cultural and language differences between Japan and the United States are also examined. (MDM)

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# Demonstrating Miscommunication Problems Between American & Japanese Businessmen Through Video

Although both Japanese and Americans may be speaking in English, miscommunication can occur because of the differences in their customs and communication styles. The main purpose of this videotape is to demonstrate communication problems and to help native and non-native Japanese speakers recognize their cultural differences. Through this presentation, two subjects are discussed: high contextuality in the Japanese language and women's position in business.

Edward T. Hall classifies culture on the basis of the communication that predominates in the culture: low-context and high-context. In low-context cultures, detailed information has to be explicitly stated when people are asked to do something or to make a decision. He asserts that the U.S. is placed toward the lower end where "the mass of the

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information is vested in the explicit code." Japan, however, falls toward the high-context end of culture where "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. For most normal transactions in daily life, Japanese do not require much in-depth background information."[1] The structure of the Japanese language also reflects this feature: high contextuality which forces non-native Japanese speakers to guess at the unstated part of sentences.

One of the preeminent features of the Japanese language is that items obvious to both conversants are not stated. The subject and its direct or indirect object of a sentence are often omitted. Thus with only a predicate, a Japanese speaker can state a completely understood sentence. This is not only true for conversation, but for the ordinary style of writing such as letters, memos, articles and literary works. For example, an English speaker might say, "Would you like to eat this cake?" if he or she is holding a piece of cake and wants to offer it to someone. A Japanese would say "Would like to eat?", omitting the "you" and "this cake." Another example is that speakers can make themselves understood simply by stating "will give" when they want to give something to an interlocutor. The words "will give" are omitted because the subject and the object in these sentences are considered so obvious and are therefore left unstated.

Only when the Japanese want to stress the word "cake" or to make sure that it is this particular cake they are offering, is "this cake" included in a sentence. Under this circumstance, the word "you" equivalent is not used.

Some U.S. students tend to translate a sentence word for word into Japanese and include "watashi" (I) and "anata" (you) in every sentence they utter. This way of conducting a conversation gives Japanese the impression that the speaker is too self-assertive which has a negative effect in Japanese society.

The use of "anata" may especially offend some Japanese. Eleanor Jorden, when introducing "anata", states, "Anata is a polite 'you' (singular), used in addressing an equal or a subordinate. It is to be carefully avoided in addressing superiors (including teachers) and persons to whom one owes special respect."[2] It is natural to skip "anata" or simply use a proper name when a speaker has to mention a subject. Thus without mentioning a subject, two people can talk for a long time as long as their topic does not shift from the matter at hand. Even after a topic shift has occurred, the conversant usually omits "he" or "she" Japanese equivalents once the name is mentioned. The following is a typical conversation example:

A: By the way, how is your son, Taro?

B: Thank you. (He) is fine. (He) is going to U.S. next month.

A: Oh really. Where will (he) go?

B: (He) said that (he) wants to go to Oregon.

A: (You must be) worried.

Another case difficult for non-Japanese to grasp is the difference between a progressive sentence structure with an intransitive verb and a progressive sentence structure with a transitive verb. For example, there are two ways to describe the parking of a car: 1. kuruma ga tomatteimasu - a car is parked. 2. kuruma ga tometearimasu - (someone) parked a car (and left it that way intentionally or unintentionally) The words in parentheses are not stated. The greatest problem for non-Japanese is that the agent -- the person who parked the car -- is not mentioned in either sentence and that both sentences sound similar. The sentence structure for 2 only alludes to an agent. For Japanese, however, there are clear differences between the two sentences in their use and implication. If a person A is about to leave a party and finds that a car is parked in front of his car, A has two choices to show his frustration. Sentence 1 sounds indirect and as a result is more polite. Sentence 2 has an accusing tone and may be considered less polite even though sentence 2 does not mention an agent, but it implies that someone did it.

An extreme case of omitting detailed information is the use of "this thing," "that thing" and "that thing over there." The way native Japanese use "this thing" and "that thing over there" is considered to be one of the most difficult usages for non-native Japanese speakers to

understand. A speaker usually does not even point out an item, the interlocutor conjectures what the speaker means. The higher the context of a group becomes, the more frequently these expressions are used. For example, a daughter can let her mother know what she wants just by saying, "Mother, get me that thing." A mother rarely fails to guess what her daughter wants.

As Nobuko Mizutani points out, English speakers also skip parts of a sentence compelling the interlocutor to guess the rest of the sentence: "If only I could see him." However, the Japanese language is even more allusive.[3] Japanese speakers often make an interlocutor infer their true intention which is unstated. For example, if person A answers in response to person B's invitation to a party, the following expression is enough to let B know A's rejection, and it is polite enough not to offend B: "Thank you, but (pause)." If B cannot recognize A's intention, A can keep giving his or her excuse until B finally gets the message. A does not state explicitly that he or she cannot go.

Skipping shared information is also a salient feature of Japanese writing. The following is an example of a typical memo where words in parentheses are not stated in the Japanese version:

Memo from Watanabe to Suzuki

(I) called up Mr. Yamanaka at home last night, but (he) was not at home. (I) talked with (his) wife. (She) said that (Mr. Yamanaka) went to Tokyo on business and would not come

back until the tenth. (I) had been thinking that the three (of us) would meet on the tenth and that (I) wanted to introduce you to Mr. Yamanaka. How about the fifteenth? (I) will contact (you) as soon as he comes back.

As a result of the high contextuality of language, people have to conjecture the unstated part from the context or sometimes from subtle gestures. Thus being able to attain the necessary information from minimal statements is viewed as a sign of a quick thinking person. The expressions such as "ki ga kiku -- considerate/tactful)" and "ki ga tsuku -- be scrupulous/be attentive" are respectively good comments. On the other hand, "ki ga kikanai" and "ki ga tsukanai -- inconsiderate / slow to analyze the circumstances" are negative labels. "Ki ga kikanai hito -- a person who can not analyze what is needed promptly from a circumstance" is considered to be stupid.

"Omoiyari" - simply translated as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" or "considerateness"-- demonstrates a more complex form of this conjecture intensive culture. Most Japanese are trained to anticipate the desires or behavior of those they deal with and act accordingly. In conformity with this principle, they often conduct themselves in such a way as to meet the expectations of their colleagues. An extreme example of "omoiyari" is a case where a Japanese businessman deliberately sat in the smoking section of a jet airliner in order to smoke. Before he could light up, an American sitting in the adjoining seat asked him

if it was all right if he, the American, could smoke. As a result of this question, the Japanese businessman never smoked because he reasoned that the American thought that he didn't smoke and that he therefore should not violate the American's expectations of his behavior.

Edward T. Hall points out this feature and explains: "When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his/her interlocutor to know what's bothering him/her so that he/she doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he/she will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly--this keystone--is the role of his/her interlocutor."[4]

Therefore, Edward Hall's observation of "high context culture" is related to politeness in Japanese discourse: the more indirect a statement, the more polite it becomes. A good example is the Japanese decision making process where, for example, two people, A and B, are talking about a date for a meeting. As a response to A's question, "itsu ga gotsugou ga yoroshii deshooka?" (Which day is convenient?) there are four possible ways B can answer. "Asatte ga iidesu." (the day after tomorrow is good.) is the least desirable one because it is a statement and does not give A the chance to show his or her preference. Three other options are "asatte wa doo desuka?" (How about the day after tomorrow?), "asatte wa ikaga desuka?" (How about the day after tomorrow?) or "asatte wa ikagadeshooka?" (How about the

day after tomorrow?). The last one, "asatte wa ikagadeshooka?" is the best in this case. "Ikaga" is the polite form of "doo", and "deshooka" is less direct than "desuka.

According to scores on Edward T. Hall's and Hofstede's Dimensions of Cultural Variability for Selected Countries, individualism in Japan scores about half that of the U.S.[5] This fact explicitly demonstrates that Japanese society is a consensus based society. The more formal a situation becomes, the less people speak out for themselves; they avoid being a decision maker. In comparison with the Japanese style, communication style in the U.S. is more direct. As Levine argues, "the American way of life, by contrast, affords little room for the cultivation of ambiguity." This feature is reflected in expressions such as "say what you mean." and "don't beat around the bush."[6]

The difference between using a direct and indirect approach is also reflected in reasoning and explaining. The Japanese have a penchant for discussing seemingly tangential matters outlining reasons for holding a certain viewpoint before actually stating what their viewpoint is. Let's suppose that representatives from an American and a Japanese company are at a negotiation table discussing their joint venture. The negotiation is taking place in the U.S. The American businessmen ask the Japanese representatives when they will be able to respond with a concrete answer on a certain subject. The Japanese representatives may begin

their answer with a detailed explanation of their schedule for their business trip, such as where their next stop will be and when they will arrive in Japan. They may also describe the organization system of their company. The lengthy explanation is the reason why the Japanese businessmen will eventually say,"We cannot give a definite date now." This circuitous route has prompted some American businessmen to interrupt their Japanese colleagues thinking they are apparently off topic. In response, the Japanese feel that Americans have no patience.

The brevity of words between a Japanese boss and his secretary, however, involves more than high-contextuality in language. Two recently published books point out that Japanese managers often speak boastfully to their female subordinates."[7] One example is where Japanese managers simply say, "copy" when they want some documents photocopied. This attitude demonstrates not only the high contextuality of the Japanese language but also illustrates the unliberated role a woman has in Japanese business.

Traditionally Japanese companies have been hiring women as subordinates for male workers. Hiroshi Kitamura, the manager of labor management for Japan Employers Association, explains, "Japanese companies have been hiring men expecting them to remain for a life time, but women are not expected to work many years--- three to six years."[8] He

continues that this is the secret of Japanese style labor management which contributed to the Japanese economic miracle. A woman's typical office assignment is serving tea, making photocopies, typing and answering telephone calls. They are supposed to marry within three to six years and quit their companies when they get married. Companies then hire younger women at a lower wage to replace them. Since their assignment is simple, they do not need special training. In other words, companies invest in men but not in women. With very few exceptions, their college degrees certify women simply for secretarial positions in well known companies or help them snare promising husbands. This situation is gradually changing especially since the law, "Women's Equal Right for Employment," passed the Diet in 1986. A career oriented position called "Sogoshoku" was created for women who wanted to pursue their career, and it seemed to have offered women the opportunity to compete with men for managerial positions. This system, however, has not been working well for at least two reasons: the Japanese style of doing business and the holdover of traditional women's work in business. Some companies still expect women in "Sogoshoku" to serve tea and at the same time compete with men.

One of the greatest obstacles for women is working overtime. Women cannot work overtime as late as men. It is quite usual for Japanese salaried men to work overtime --

sometimes even after midnight -- when economic conditions are good and their companies are prosperous. Tetsuo Ihara, Professor of Keio University, points out that Japanese companies have their employees work overtime rather than hiring new employees when they become very busy.[9] When there is a recession and companies are not so busy, they simply reduce their working hours. Thus companies do not have to lay off their workers and maintain labor costs lower than most U.S. companies.

Household chores are still mostly done by women. According to research conducted by ABC in 1992, Japanese men spend only three minutes per day helping their wives.[10] Under these circumstances, it is almost impossible for women to compete for managerial positions with men. They are forced to choose between becoming either a housewife or an unmarried career woman. Some women are nevertheless trying to maintain their careers while they are raising children. When their earnest work is recognized and they are offered a promotion, however, many of them decline the offer.[11] One of the reasons is that they are incapable of working overtime as late as men.

The type of work "Sogoshoku"- career oriented position - is different depending on the company. In some companies, women in "Sogoshoku" have to work like their male counterparts and at the same time have to do some chores such

as serving tea and cleaning their colleagues' desks. "No matter how hard and how efficient they work, women are not supposed to demonstrate that they can do a better job than their male counterparts," says a woman who used to have a "Shogoshoku" position.[12] According to a recent report by the National Public Broadcasting Company in Tokyo, eight out of ten women still serve tea for men, and nine out of ten make photocopies if they are asked to do so.[13]

Under these circumstances, some Japanese businessmen do not understand that women are capable of holding superior positions over male employees. One episode introduced in One Hundred Eleven Troubles demonstrates this behavior well.[14] Some Japanese businessmen visited a U.S. factory . During their visit, they ignored an American female supervisor and continued asking questions of her male subordinate. They did not even give her their business cards although they gave one to her male subordinate.

When I taught Japanese to a group of American businessmen during the summer of 1992, there were included two female managers of a major U.S. computer company. I offered the female managers two suggestions: 1. demonstrate that they are the decision maker. 2. obtain their male subordinates' support to prove it. One of the managers went to Japan and reported that the two suggestions had worked. She sat at the center of the table and answered all the crucial questions.

This type of discrimination against American businesswomen been reduced, but it still firmly remains in Japan. A Japanese woman who won a career oriented position in a top company explains from her experience how difficult it is to change mid-managers' attitudes towards women in the office.[15] Whenever she works overtime, her managers say,"your husband must be a very patient person." or "I feel sorry for him." They also say, "you will quit working when you become pregnant, right?" The managers may not have any wrongful intention, but their comments surely discourage her, making her wonder about her future in the company.

Japanese white collar male workers tend to consider their female subordinates as one of their own family members, i.e., a good subordinate is just like a good wife. Therefore, Japanese businessmen are not so sensitive about sexual harassment as American businessmen. Japanese men pat their female subordinates' shoulders and heads. Some of them even touch their hips. They also comment on their physical features such as their breasts, hips and legs. It is a matter of course that female subordinates serve sake or beer to male colleagues at a party. It is not unusual that some female workers are asked to entertain their company customers at restaurants or bars after work. One middle manager from a top class company said during a panel discussion held by

Nihon Broadcasting that he does not assign female workers to entertain his company customers after work, because men tend to become sexually arosed when they drink.[16]

I have a personal friend whose experience explicitly shows the fact that some Japanese men do not understand what sexual harassment means. My friend is teaching Japanese at a university on the U.S. east coast. Two years ago a deligation from one of the suburbs of Tokyo visited her university. During the reception, one member of the deligation, the president of a farmers' association, approched her saying, "I hear that you are teaching Japanese here." He added, "What a waste." Then he suddenly grabbed her wrist and said, "They say that a woman with a thin wrist has a thin waist." He continued, "They also say that a woman with cold hands is passionate in bed." She did not slap him because he was the university president's guest, and she thought that he was ignorant about ettiquette. For most Japanese men, the concept of "sexual harassment" is as foreign as "sexual discrimination."

## Conclusion

"Americans are too direct in asking questions, giving opinions, and poking fun. This can put us on the spot and cause awkwardness of feelings or discomfort. Some even mistake our embarrassed laughter as appreciation." This is one of the American habits that Japanese grumble about

according to John Condon. He also lists Japanese habits that American grumble about: "the Japanese use vague words and ambiguous expressions so that it is hard to know where they stand. Sometimes even other Japanese say that they are not sure of what to conclude about some discussions in Japanese."[17] These comments on each culture explicitly demonstrate the high contextual dimension of Japanese language and society. Japanese tend to skip information which may be essential for Americans and use very indirect expressions even when they are speaking in English, because they simply want to be polite. On the other hand, Americans want to make everything perfectly clear and to make sure that Japanese understand their intentions. As a result, Japanese think that Americans talk too much.

Bonnie Severy says that three factors are required in order to realize equal opportunity for women: 1. law 2. women's will power 3. social support.[18] In Japan, only the first factor exists. Even though Japan is said to be ten years behind other civilized countries such as U.S., the society is slowly but steadly changing. Thus the image of Japanese men as male shauvinists may soon become a relic of the past.

Even though there are cultural and language differences between the two countries, their citizens should strive to solve communication problems because the two countries are

important partners, and their economies are interdependent. The effort to breach the gap would be mutually beneficial.

In order to provide examples of miscommunication between Japanese and Americans, a videotape can be very effective. Videotape is an easy way to understand the problem because it can demonstrate concrete examples better than written and audio materials, i.e., seminars and broadcasts over the Education Network. Thus videotapes can be used as supplemental material for regular language classes. After showing skits in the videotape, the instructor can lead a discussion in the following topics: Why do Japanese skip so many words? Why does the Japanese line of reasoning seem so circuitous? What would you do if you were facing this kind of problem? It is ideal to have both Americans and Japanese in the class so that the discussion is bilateral.

## Notes

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Biographical Sketch

Co-owner of an art company designing art exhibitions for museums and department stores 1974 - 1979.

Visited Europe twice on business
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Received B.A & M.A. in comparative literature from the University of Oregon in 1984

Taught all levels of Japanese language classes at the University of Oregon 1984 - 90

Designed and taught a special short course of Japanese language and culture for a computer company in Oregon in 1990.

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